

OLAUS MAGNUS, CREDULOUS ZOOLOGIST, AND ARCHBISHOP OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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Perhaps it is wrong to call Olaus Magnus a zoologist. Nevertheless he wrote about animals, and he was credulous—at a time, however, when credulity was not uncommon.

Authors usually believe what they themselves write, and Olaus wrote that in the regions of the North, the bees infested drunkards, and stung them, being attracted by the odor of their rum-soaked bodies. Apparently only hydropots were safe from their attacks. Hornets, too, if his illustrations can be relied upon, were quite savage, killing both men and beasts, and northern bears went mad after eating the narcotic *Mandragora* but recovered by eating ants.

Of the were-wolves, he wrote, "They go into the Beer-Cellars, and there they drink out some Tuns of Beer or Mede, and they heap al the empty vessels, one upon another in the midst of the Cellar, and so leave them; wherein they differ from natural and true Wolves." Ducks in Scotland, he said, according to a Scotch historian, "breed of a certain Fruit falling in the Sea; and these shortly after, get wings, and fly to the tame or wild ducks." He wrote that swallows hibernated under water, that the griffin preyed upon horses and men, that the sea cow, "is known to have lived 130 years, by cutting off her tail," and of the sea-serpent, he said, "They who Work of Navigation, on the Coasts of Norway, employ themselves in fishing, or merchandize, do all agree in this strange Story, that there is a Serpent there which is of a Vast Magnitude, namely 200 feet long, and moreover, 20 foot thick; and is wont to live in Rocks and Caves toward the Sea Coast about Berge; which will go alone from his holes in a clear night in Summer, and devour Calves, Lambs, and Hogs, or else he goes into the Sea to feed on Polypus, Locusts, and all sorts of Sea Crabs. He hath commonly hair hanging from his neck a cubit long, and sharp Scales, and is black, and he hath flaming

shining eys. This Snake disquiets the Shippers, and he puts his head on high like a pillar, and catcheth away men, and he devours them; and this hapneth not, but it signifies some wonderful change of the Kingdom near at hand; namely that the Princes shall die, or be banished; or some Tumultuous Wars shall presently follow."

All of which, and more of the same kind, appears in his work on history, geography and natural history known briefly as a "History of the Northern Nations," in which he also displays his dislike of the Protestants. Consisting of twenty-two parts, it deals with the political and commercial life of the northern countries, the customs of the people, the land and its minerals and animals. According to Hagen, it is a folio of 815 pages, of which pages 779 to 801 are devoted to insects. It was printed in Rome in 1555 and later editions were published in Antwerp in 1558, Basle in 1567 and Frankfort in 1618. It was also translated into German, Italian, Dutch and English, the English edition appearing in London in 1658.

Olaus also wrote a life of Catharine, daughter of the Swedish St. Bridget, "*Vita Catharinæ*" and edited some of his brother's books. His knowledge of the North was said to have been quite extensive for his time, and part of his activity consisted in the preparation of a map of the northern lands, which appeared in Venice in 1539.

Born at Skeninge, Sweden, in 1490, he studied in Germany from 1510 to 1517, and then entered higher religious service and was made cathedral provost at Strengnas. In 1523 King Gustave I named his brother John, Archbishop of Upsala and dispatched Olaus to the Pope to have the appointment confirmed. John Magnus was fiercely opposed to the Protestant religion and tried unsuccessfully to prevent the king from introducing it into Sweden. In 1537 John went to Rome and Olaus accompanied him as his secretary, having lost his property when the king confiscated the church lands. Both suffered annoyances while in Sweden as a result of their attachment to the Church. When John died in 1544, Olaus was appointed Archbishop of Upsala, but he never entered into office, and lived the remainder of his

life in Italy, mainly in Rome. In 1545 Paul III commissioned him to attend the Council of Trent, which he did until 1549. He died in Rome, August 1, 1558, and was buried in St. Peter's. Zoologically he belonged to the Middle Ages.

References

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